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⑤④ **Electrospray coating process and apparatus.**

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Description

Technical Field

This invention relates to an apparatus and method for electrospraying a coating material onto a substrate.

Background Art

A number of substrate coating methods are presently available. Mechanical applications such as roll coating, knife coating and the like are easy and inexpensive in themselves. However, because these methods give thick coatings of typically greater than 5 micrometers (μm), there are solvents to be disposed of and this disposal requires large drying ovens and pollution control equipment, thus making the total process expensive and time consuming. These processes are even more awkward for applying very thin coatings, for example, less than 500 Angstroms (\AA). To apply such thin coatings by present coating techniques requires very dilute solutions and therefore very large amounts of solvent must be dried off. The uniformity and thickness of the dried final coating is difficult to control.

Physical vapor deposition techniques are useful for applying thin and very thin coatings on substrates. They require high vacuums with the attendant processing problems for a continuous process and are therefore capital intensive. They also can only coat materials that can be sputtered or vapor coated.

The present invention relates to an electrostatic spraying process but it is unlike conventional electrostatic processes which have been used for a number of years. Such processes for example, are used in the painting industry and textile industry where large amounts of material are applied to flat surfaces wherein application of such coatings use a droplet size in the 100 micrometer range with a large distribution of drop sizes. Uniform coatings thus start at about 200 micrometer thickness, which are thick film coating processes. Significant amounts of solvents are required and these solvents do not evaporate in travel from sprayer to substrate so the coating is a solvent wet coating which then requires drying. It is difficult to coat nonconductive substrates with these processes. The spray head design for these electrostatic coating processes usually are noncapillary and designed so that the charged material to be coated comes off a sharp edge or point and forms very large droplets. For example, Ransburg, U.S. patent No. 2,893,894 shows an apparatus for coating paints and the like from an electrostatic spray gun. Probst, U.S. patent No. 3,776,187 teaches electrostatic spraying of carpet backings from a knife edge type apparatus.

Liquid jet generators for ink jet printing are a controlled form of electrostatic spraying. In ink jet generators, streams of drops of liquid on the order of 75 to 125 micrometers in diameter are produced, charged and then guided in single file by electric fields along the drop stream path to the desired destination to form the printed character. Sweet, U.S. patent No. 3,596,275 describes such a generator wherein the series of drops are produced by spaced varicosities in the issuing jet by either mechanical or electrical means. These drops are charged and passed one by one through a pair of electrostatic deflecting electrodes thereby causing the writing to occur on a moving substrate beneath the generator.

Van Heyningen, U.S. patent No. 4,381,342 discloses a method for depositing photographic dyes on film substrates using three such ink jet generators as just described in tandem and causing each different material to be laid down in a controlled non-overlapping matrix.

The design of structures to generate small charged droplets are different from the aforementioned devices for painting and jet printing. Zelany, Physical Review, Vol. 3, p. 69 (1914) used a charged capillary to study the electrical charges on droplets. Darrah, U.S. patent No. 1,958,406, sprayed small charged droplets into ducts and vessels as reactants because he found such droplets to be "in good condition for rapid chemical action".

In an article in Journal of Colloid Science, Vol. 7, p. 616 Vonnegut & Neubauer (1952) there is a teaching of getting drops below 1 micrometer in diameter by using a charged fluid. Newab and Mason, Journal of Colloid Science, Vol. 13, p. 179, (1958) used a charged metal capillary to produce fine drops and collected them in a liquid. Krohn, U.S. patent no. 3,157,819, showed an apparatus for producing charged liquid particles for space vehicles. Pfeifer and Hendricks, AIAA Journal, Vol. 6, p. 496, (1968) studied Krohn's work and used a charged metal capillary and an extractor plate (ground return electrode) to expel fine droplets away from the capillary to obtain a fundamental understanding of the process. Marks, U.S. patent No. 3,503,704 describes such a generator to impart charged particles in a gas stream to control and remove pollutants. Mutoh, et al, Journal of Applied Physics, Vol. 50, p. 3174 (1979) described the disintegration of liquid jets induced by an electrostatic field. Fite, U.S. patent No. 4,209,696, describes a generator to create molecules and ions for further analysis and to produce droplets containing only one molecule or ion for use in a mass spectrometer and also describes the known literature and the concept of the electrospray method as practiced since Zelany's studies. Mahoney, U.S. patent no. 4,264,641, claimed a method to produce molten metal powder thin films in a vacuum using electrohydrodynamic spraying. Coffee, U.S. patent No. 4,356,528 and U.S. patent No. 4,476,515 describes a process

and apparatus for spraying pesticides on field crops and indicates the idea drop size for this application is between 30 and 200 micrometers.

The prior art does not teach an electrostatic coater for applying coatings 10 to 5000 Å thick at atmospheric pressure.

5 The prior art does not teach the use of a coater with a wide electrostatic spray head having a plurality of capillary needles.

Disclosure of Invention

10 The present invention provides a noncontacting method and a multiorifice spray apparatus to accurately and uniformly apply a coating onto a substrate to any desired coating thickness from a few tens of angstroms to a few thousand angstroms at atmospheric pressure and at industrially acceptable process coating speeds. The process is most useful in coating webs, disks, and other flat surfaces although irregular substrates can also be coated.

15 According to one aspect of this invention there is provided an electrospray head for producing a small particle discharge comprising a capillary needle and a surrounding surface, both at least semiconductive, between which a potential may be placed to produce an atomising of liquid at the needle orifice wherein a conductive plate supports a plurality of capillary needles arranged in at least two rows with the tips of said needles being in the same plane, and a conductive extractor plate having a plurality of circular holes is positioned with one said needle positioned coaxially with each hole and the extractor plate is spaced a predetermined distance from said conductive plate to develop a uniform mist discharge of fluid from the needles, a manifold means, communicating with said capillary needles, for supplying liquid to said rows of capillary needles, and electrical means for developing an electrical potential between each said capillary needle and said extractor plate for applying a thin coating to a web, and means for developing a second electrical potential between the needles and the surface to be coated.

25 The coating process of the present invention is useful in coating monomers, oligomers and solutions onto a substrate in a uniform coating at a thickness of 10 to 5000 Angstroms at atmospheric pressure in air.

30 According to a further aspect of this invention there is provided a process for coating a surface of a web having sufficient surface energy to allow wetting of its surface by small droplets of a coating material to form a thin coating comprising the steps of pumping the coating material to a capillary needle, creating an electrostatic force between the needle and a surrounding extractor plate to generate a spray of droplets, wherein a plurality of needles in at least two rows are positioned transverse to the web and the process includes the steps of advancing a said web transversely of said rows of capillary needles, creating a second electrical potential between said needles and said web surface to attract charged droplets of material to said surface, and removing the charge on said surface of said substrate.

A curing step may be necessary, depending on the material. The web can receive a second coating or be rewound.

Brief Description of Drawings

The invention will be described in greater detail with reference to the accompanying drawing wherein:

45 Figure 1 is a front elevational view showing one embodiment of the dispensing and coating head of this invention;

Figure 2 is a bottom view of the dispensing and coating head;

Figure 3 is a diagrammatic view showing the basic steps in a continuous process utilizing a head constructed according to this invention;

50 Figure 4 is a diagrammatic view of the electrical circuit for the present invention and a single dispensing needle used to produce an ultra-fine mist of droplets; and

Figure 5 is a vertical partial sectional view of a second embodiment of a coating head according to the present invention.

Detailed Description

60 The present invention relates to an electrospray process for applying thin and very thin coatings to substrates. As used herein electrospray, also referred to as electrohydrodynamic spray, is a type of electrostatic spray. While electrostatic spray is the use of electric fields to create and act on charged droplets of the material to be coated so as to control said material application, it is normally practiced by applying heavy coatings of material as for example in paint spraying of parts. In the present invention electrospray describes the spraying of very fine droplets from a plurality of spaced capillary needles and directing these droplets by action of a field onto substrates, usually in very thin coating thicknesses.

65 Thin films and very thin films of selected materials on substrates are useful as primers, low adhesion

backsizes, release coatings, lubricants and the like. In many cases only a few monomolecular layers of material are required and the present invention is capable of applying such coatings at thicknesses of a few angstroms to a few thousand angstroms. The concept of this invention is the generation of an ultra-fine mist of material and the controlled application of that mist to a substrate to provide a uniform thin film coating of the material on the substrate.

The coating head, generally designated 10, comprises a plurality of capillary tubes or needles 11 in two parallel rows to produce an even, uniform coating of material on a substrate moved beneath the head 10. A coating head design utilizing 27 such needles to produce a 30.5 cm wide coating on a substrate is shown in Figure 1. The capillary needles 11 have a very small bore of a size in which capillarity takes place but the needles must be large enough in inside diameter so that plugging does not occur for normally clean fluids. The extractor plate holes 13 are large enough to assure arcing does not occur between the plate 14 and the needles 11 but small enough to provide the desired electric field strength necessary to generate the mist of droplets.

The liquid to be electrosprayed is fed into an electrospray manifold 15 from a feeder line 16 which is also attached to a suitable liquid pump (not shown). The line 16 is connected to a tee 17 to direct liquid toward both sides of the manifold 15, and the liquid in manifold 15 is distributed to the array of capillary needles 11. Stainless steel needles with an inside diameter (ID) of 300 micrometers (μm) and an outside diameter (OD) of 500 μm and length of 2.5 centimeters (cm) have been used. The needles 11 are covered with size 24 Voltex Tubing, an insulative tubing from SPC Technology, Chicago, Illinois, to within 0.8 mm of their tip to restrict buildup of coating material on the needles. The needles 11 have a seat 20 attached to a metal plate 21. The plate 21 is connected to a high voltage supply V_1 through a wire 24. The extractor plate 14 is formed of aluminum or stainless steel and is insulated from the high voltage plate 21 using ceramic adjustable spacers 25 which position the needles through the holes of the extractor plate 14 with the tips of the capillary needles 11 extending slightly beyond the extractor plate. The bottom planar surface and planar edges of the extractor plate 14 is covered with a 0.2 mm thickness of Scotch Brand® 5481 insulative film pressure sensitive adhesive tape available from Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing Company of St. Paul, Minnesota. The tape is an insulator and prevents build-up of electrospray material on this surface. Alternatively, the bottom of this plate can be covered with other insulating material. The extractor plate 14 is 1.6 mm thick and has 27 1.9 cm ID holes 13 drilled in it and placed 2.2 cm on center. These holes 13 are aligned with one hole concentric with each capillary needle 11. As a result, an electric field E_1 (see Figure 4) produced by a difference in electrical potential between the capillary needle 11 and the extractor plate or electrode 14 has radial symmetry. The electric field E_1 is the primary force field used to electrically stress the liquid at the tip of the capillary opening of needle 11 and can be adjusted by the high voltage supply V_1 or by adjusting screws in spacers 25 to change the relative distance between the tips of the needles 11 and the extractor electrode 14. The substrate 30 (see Figure 4) to be coated is placed several centimeters away from the tips of capillary needles 11 with a metal ground plane 31 placed behind the substrate 30. The substrate 30 is also usually charged with the opposite polarity to that of the capillary needles.

A single needle 11 of the coating head 10 is shown in Figure 4. Each needle 11 is used to produce an ultra-fine mist of droplets. The capillary needle 11 is supplied with the material to be coated from the manifold 15 at a low flow rate and is placed in proximity to the extractor plate 14 with radial symmetry to the hole 13 in the extractor plate 14. An electrical potential V_1 applied between the capillary needle 11 and the extractor plate 14 provides a radially symmetrical electric field between the two. The liquid is electrically stressed by this electric field first into a cone 34 at the very end of the capillary needle and then into a fine filament 35. This filament 35 is typically one or two orders of magnitude smaller than the capillary diameter. Rayleigh jet breakup of this fine liquid filament occurs and causes a fine mist 36 of highly charged ultra-fine droplets to be produced.

These droplets can be further reduced in size if evaporation of solvent from the droplet occurs. When this happens it is believed the charge on the droplet will at some point exceed the Rayleigh charge limit and the droplet will disrupt into several highly charged, but stable smaller droplets. Each of these droplets undergoes further evaporation until the Rayleigh charge limit is again reached and disruption again occurs. Through a succession of several disruptions, solute droplets as small as 500 angstroms in diameter can be produced.

The ultra-fine droplets can be controlled and directed by electric fields to strike the surface of substrate 30 positioned over the ground plane 31. A spreading of the drops occurs on the surface of the substrate and the surface coating is produced. Figure 4 also shows the electrical circuit for the electrospray process. The polarities shown in Figure 4 from the illustrated battery are commonly used, however, these polarities can be reversed. As illustrated, the positive polarity is applied to the capillary needle 11. A negative polarity is attached to the extractor plate 14.

Voltage V_1 is produced between the needle 11 and extractor plate 14 by a high voltage supply and is adjusted to create the desired electric field, E_1 , between the capillary tip and extractor plate. This electric field E_1 is dependent on the geometry of the capillary needle and extractor plate.

The mist 36 to be created is dependent upon the fluid and electrical properties of the solution in conjunction with electric field E_1 . Fine control of E_1 , and thus the mist, can be obtained by varying the capillary tip position with respect to the plane of the extractor plate 14 or by varying the voltage V_1 . Although

the capillary tip of needle 11 can be located within about 2 cm of either side of the plane of the extractor plate, the preferred position is with the needle extending through the extractor plate 14 from 0.5 to 1.5 cm. The voltage to obtain this field E_1 for the geometry herein described ranges from 3 kV dc to 10 kV dc and is typically between 4 kV dc and 8 kV dc. An alternating current may be imposed on the circuit between the needle and the extractor plate for purposes of producing a frequency modulated to stabilize the creation of monosized droplets.

The substrate to be coated is charged as described hereinafter and a voltage V_2 results, the magnitude of which is a function of the charge per unit area on the substrate 30, the substrate thickness and its dielectric constant. When the substrate 30 to be coated is conductive and at ground potential the voltage V_2 is zero. Discrete conductive substrates, such as a metal disc, placed on an insulated carrier web, can be charged and would have an impressed voltage V_2 . An electric field E_2 generated between the capillary tip of the needle 11 and the substrate 30 is a function of V_1 and V_2 and the distance between the capillary tip and the substrate. To insure placement of all the mist droplets on the substrate it is necessary that the potential V_2 never obtains the same polarity as potential V_1 . Although coatings are possible when these polarities are the same, coating thickness cannot be assured since some droplets are repelled from the substrate and therefore process control is lost. The distance between the capillary tip and the substrate is determined experimentally. If the distance is too small, the mist doesn't expand properly and if the distance is too great the field E_2 is weak and control is lost in directing the droplets to the substrate. The typical distance for the geometry herein described is between 5 cm and 15 cm. Plates positioned perpendicular to the extractor plate and extending in the direction of movement of the substrate help guide the droplets to the substrate.

In the electrospray process electric field E_1 is the primary field controlling the generation of the fine mist. Electric field E_2 is used to direct the droplets to the substrate where they lose their charge and spread to form the desired coating. Because the droplets tend to repel each other, thin paths through the coating of the first row of needles appear and the staggered position of the needles in the second row of needles in relationship to the path of the web will produce droplets which will coat the paths left by the first row of needles.

Referring now to Figure 3, where the coating process is shown schematically, a roll 40 of substrate 30 to be treated is optionally passed through a corona treater 41 where an electrical discharge precleans the substrate 30. The corona treater 41 may also excite or activate the molecules of the cleaned surface. This can raise the surface energy of the substrate and enhance the wetting and spreading of droplets deposited on the surface. Other methods of cleaning or using a fresh substrate would, of course, be within the spirit of the precleaning step.

If the substrate is nonconductive, a charge, opposite in polarity from the droplet spray, is then placed on the substrate, as for example, by a corona wire 43. Of course, other methods, including ion beams, ionized forced air, etc., could also be used in the charging step. The magnitude of the charge placed on the surface is monitored using an electrostatic voltmeter 45 or other suitable means. If the substrate is conductive, this charging step is produced by connecting the substrate to ground.

The liquid to be electrosprayed is provided at a predetermined volume flow rate through a group of capillary needles 11 at the electrospray head 10 such as shown in Figure 1. The electric field E_2 forces the fine droplets of electrospray mist 36 down to the surface of the substrate 30 where charge neutralization occurs as the droplets contact the substrate and spread. If the substrate is nonconductive the charge neutralization reduces the net charge on the substrate and this reduction is measured with an electrostatic voltmeter 47. For accurate coatings, the voltage measured at 47 must be of the same polarity as the voltage measured at 45. This assures a reasonably strong electric field terminates on the substrate, thus affording a high degree of process control.

Under most conditions it is advantageous to neutralize the charge on the substrate after coating. This neutralization step can be accomplished by methods well known in the coating art. A typical neutralizing head 48 may be a Model 641-ESE 3M™ Electrical Static Eliminator obtainable from Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing Company of St. Paul, Minnesota. The coating material is then cured by a method suitable for the coating material and such curing device is depicted at 49 and the coated substrate is re-wound in a roll 50. A typical curing device may be a UV lamp, an electron beam or a thermal heater.

A second embodiment of the coating head is illustrated in Figure 5 and comprises two longitudinal rows of capillary needles 11 secured to a stainless steel plate 60 to communicate with a reservoir 15. The reservoir is formed by a gasket 61 positioned between the plate 60 and a second plate 62 having an opening communicating with a supply line 16 leading from a pump supplying the coating material.

The needles 11 extend through openings 13 in an extractor plate 14. A sheet of plastic material 64 is positioned above the upper planar surface of the extractor plate 14 with an opening 65 to receive the needle 11. A second sheet 66 is positioned adjacent the opposite planar surface of the plate 14 and covers the planar edges. The sheet 66 has a countersunk hole 68 formed therein and aligned with each hole 13 to restrict the movement of any droplets toward the extractor plate 14 under the electrostatic forces produced between the extractor plate 14 and the needles 11. The extractor plate 14 and sheets 64 and 66 are supported from the conductive plate 60 by insulative spacers 70 and 71. A plate 72 provides support for the head and is joined to the coating head by insulative braces 73.

The solution to be electrosprayed must have certain physical properties to optimize the process. The

electrical conductivity should be between 10^{-7} and 10^{-3} siemens per meter. If the electrical conductivity is much greater than 10^{-3} siemens per meter, the liquid flow rate in the electro-spray becomes too low to be of practical value. If the electrical conductivity is much less than 10^{-7} siemens per meter, liquid flow rate becomes so high that thick film coatings result.

5 The surface tension of the liquid to be electro-sprayed (if in air at atmospheric pressure) should be below about 65 millinewtons per meter and preferably below 50 millinewtons per meter. If the surface tension is too high a corona will occur around the air at the capillary tip. This will cause a loss of electro-spray control and can cause an electrical spark. The use of a gas different from air will change the allowed maximum surface tension according to the breakdown strength of the gas. Likewise, a pressure change from atmospheric pressure and the use of an inert gas to prevent a reaction of the droplets on the way to the substrate is possible. This can be accomplished by placing the electro-spray generator in a chamber and the curing station could also be disposed in this chamber. A reactive gas may be used to cause a desired reaction with the liquid filament or droplets.

10 The viscosity of the liquid must be below a few thousand centipoise, and preferably below a few hundred centipoise. If the viscosity is too high, the filament 35 will not break up into uniform droplets.

15 The electro-spray process of the present invention has many advantages over the prior art. Because the coatings can be put on using little or no solvent, there is no need for large drying ovens and their expense, and there are less pollution and environmental problems. Indeed in the present invention, the droplets are so small that most if not all of the solvent present evaporates before the droplets strike the substrate. This small use of solvent means there is rapid drying of the coating and thus multiple coatings in a single process line have been obtained. Porous substrates can be advantageously coated on one side only because there is little or no solvent available to penetrate to the opposite side.

20 This is a noncontacting coating process with good control of the uniform coating thickness and can be used on any conductive or nonconductive substrate. There are no problems with temperature sensitive materials as the process is carried out at room temperature. Of course if higher or lower temperatures are required, the process conditions can be changed to achieve the desired coatings. This process can coat low viscosity liquids, so monomers or oligomers can be coated and then polymerized in place on the substrate. The process can also be used to coat through a mask leaving a pattern of coated material on the substrate. Likewise, the substrate can be charged in a pattern and the electro-spray mist will preferentially coat the charged areas.

25 The following examples illustrate the use of the electro-spray process to coat various materials at thickness ranging from a few tens of angstroms to a few thousand angstroms (Å).

35 Example 1

This example describes the use of the electro-spray coating process to deposit a very low coating thickness of primer. The solution to be coated was prepared by mixing 80 ml of Cross-linker CX-100™ polyfunctional aziridine crosslinker from Polyvinyl Chemical Industries, Wilmington, Mass. 01887, with 20 ml of water. This material was introduced into a coating head which contained only 21 capillary needles using a Sage™ Model 355 syringe pump available from Sage Instruments of Cambridge, Massachusetts. A high voltage (V_1) of 3.4 to 3.8 kV dc was applied between the capillary needles 11 and the extractor plate 14.

40 A 25.4 cm wide 0.2 mm poly(ethyleneterephthalate) (PET) film was introduced into the transport mechanism. The electro-spray extractor plate, held at ground potential, was spaced approximately 6 cm from the film surface. The capillary tip to extractor plate distance was 1.2 cm.

The film was charged under the Corona charger to a potential of approximately - 4.6 kV. The web speed was held fixed at 23 m/min and the volume flow rate per orifice and high voltage potential on the spray head were varied to give the final primer coatings shown as follows:

Head potential (V_1)	Per orifice	
	volume flow rate	Coating thickness
+(kV)	(μ l/hr)	Å
3.8	104	50
3.8	89	43
3.4	85	41
3.4	73	35

Coating thicknesses were calculated from first principles. These thicknesses are too small to measure but standard. tape peel tests in both the cross web and down web directions after thermal curing showed an increased peel force, proving the primer material was present.

Example 2

The object of this example is to show the production of a release liner for adhesive products using a low adhesion backsize (LAB) coating. A first mixture of perfluoropolyether-diacylate (PPE-DA) was prepared as described in U.S. patent No. 3,810,874. The coating solution was prepared by mixing 7.5 ml of PPE-DA, 70 ml of Freon® 113 from E. I. Du Pont de Nemours of Wilmington, Delaware, 21 ml of isopropyl alcohol and 1.5 ml of distilled water. This material was introduced into the 27 needle coating head using a Sage™ model 355 syringe pump to provide a constant flow rate of material. A high voltage V_1 of -5.9 kV dc was applied between the capillary needles and the extractor plate.

A 30.5 cm wide 0.07 mm PET corona pre-cleaned film was introduced into the transport mechanism. The electrospray extractor plate, held at ground potential, was spaced approximately 6 cm from the film surface. The capillary tip to extractor plate distance was 0.8 cm.

The film passed under the Corona charger and the surface was charged to a potential of approximately +5 kV. The web transport speed was fixed at 12.2 m/min and the volume flow rate per orifice was varied giving the final LAB uncured coating thicknesses shown:

per orifice volume flow rate ($\mu\text{l/hr}$)	Coating thickness μA
2200	200
4400	400
6600	600
8800	800
11000	1000

Coating thicknesses were calculated from first principles and then verified to be within 10% by a transesterification analysis similar to the description in Handbook of Analytical Derivatization Reactions, John Wiley and Sons, (1979), page 166.

Example 3

This example shows the use of the electrospray process for coating lubricants on films. A first mixture consisting of a 3:1 weight ratio of hexadecyl stearate and oleic acid was prepared. The coating solution was prepared by mixing 65 ml of the above solution with 34 ml of acetone and 1 ml of water. This material was introduced into the 27 needle coating head using a Sage™ Model 355 syringe pump. A high voltage of -9.5 kV dc was applied between the capillary needles and the grounded extractor plate.

Strips of material to be later used for magnetic floppy discs were taped on a 30 cm wide, 0.07 mm PET transport web. The extractor plate was spaced approximately 10 cm from the film surface. The capillary tip to extractor plate distance was 1.2 cm.

The surface of the strips were charged under the Corona charger to a potential of approximately +0.9 kV. The web transport speed and the volume flow rate per orifice were varied to give the final lubricant coating thicknesses shown as follows:

	Web speed	per orifice volume flow rate	Coating thickness
5	(m/min)	(μ l/hr)	\AA
	16.7	1747	1000
10	12.2	2541	2000
	12.2	3811	3000
	10.1	3811	3650

Coating thicknesses were calculated from first principles and verified to be within 15% by standard solvent extraction techniques.

Example 4

This example describes the use of the electrospray coating process to deposit a very low coating thickness of primer on a film in an industrial setting. The solution to be coated was prepared as a mixture of 70 volume % Cross-linker CX-100™ from Polyvinyl Chemical Industries, and 30 volume % isopropyl alcohol. This solution was introduced into a 62 capillary needle spray head using a Micropump® from Micropump Corporation, Concord, California. A voltage of +9 kV dc was applied between the capillary needles and the extractor plate. The extractor plate was covered with a 0.95 cm thick layer of Lexan® plastic as available from General Electric Company of Schenectady, New York, as shown in Figure 5, instead of the aforementioned 0.2 mm layer of Scotch Brand® 5481 film tape.

A 96.5 cm wide 0.11 mm PET film was introduced into the transport mechanism. The electrospray extractor plate, held at ground potential, was spaced approximately 6.8 cm from the film surface. The capillary tip to extractor plate distance was 1.1 cm.

The film passed under the corona charger and the surface was charged to a potential of approximately -10 kV.

The film speed was held constant at 98.5 m/min. and the solution flow rate was held at 1300 μ l/orifice/hr. The calculated coating thickness of primer was 100 \AA .

Claims

1. An electrospray head for producing a small particle discharge comprising a capillary needle and a surrounding surface, both at least semiconductive, between which a potential may be placed to produce an atomising of liquid at the needle orifice wherein a conductive plate (21) supports a plurality of capillary needles (11) arranged in at least two rows with the tips of said needles being in the same plane, and a conductive extractor plate (14) having a plurality of circular holes (13) is positioned with one said needle (11) positioned coaxially with each hole (13) and the extractor plate (14) is spaced a predetermined distance from said conductive plate (21) to develop a uniform mist discharge of fluid from the needles (11), a manifold means (15), communicating with said capillary needles (11), for supplying liquid to said rows of capillary needles (11), and electrical means (V_1) for developing an electrical potential between each said capillary needle (11) and said extractor plate (14) for applying a thin coating to a web (30), and means (E_2) for developing a second electrical potential between the needles (11) and the surface to be coated.

2. An electrospray coating head according to claim 1 characterized in that said plurality of capillary needles (11) includes more than twenty needles disposed in two parallel rows with the needles (11) staggered in transverse spacial relationship in the rows.

3. An electrospray coating head according to claim 1, characterized in that an insulating layer (64, 66) is disposed on said extractor plate on the planar surfaces thereof to restrict droplets from collecting on the extractor plate (14).

4. An electrospray coating head according to claim 3 characterized in that said insulating layer (64, 66) is an insulative pressure sensitive adhesive tape.

5. An electrospray coating head according to claim 3 characterized in that said insulating layer (64, 66) is a thin sheet of insulative plastic sheet material.

6. An electrospray coating head according to claim 1 characterized in that said needles are covered by an insulative covering.

7. A process for coating a surface of a web (30) having sufficient surface energy to allow wetting of its surface by small droplets of a coating material to form a thin coating comprising the steps of pumping the coating material to a capillary needle (11), creating an electrostatic force (E_1) between the needle (11)

and a surrounding extractor plate (14) to generate a spray of droplets, wherein a plurality of needles (11) in at least two rows are positioned transverse to the web (30) and the process includes the further steps of advancing said web (30) transversely of said rows of capillary needles (11), creating a second electrical (E₂) potential between said needles and said web surface to attract charged droplets of material to said surface, and removing the charge on said surface of said substrate.

8. A process according to claim 7 characterized in that the process includes the step of pumping said material to said needles (11) at volumes of between 70 and 11,000 µl/hr per needle to produce a coating of material with a thickness less than 5000 Angstroms.

9. A process according to claim 7 or 8 characterized in that the process includes the steps of charging said web (30) to develop an electrostatic field, and said advancing step includes passing the web past at least two rows of capillary needles (11) which are staggered and spaced from the path of said substrate.

10. A process according to claim 8 characterized in that said coating material is one of an oligomer or monomer.

11. A process according to claim 8 characterized in that said process includes the step of curing the coating.

12. A process according to claim 9 characterized in that it includes the step of cleaning said substrate prior to charging said substrate.

13. A process according to claim 9 characterized in that said charging step comprises placing a charge on one surface of a substrate where said coating is desired.

14. A process according to claim 9 characterized in that said charging step comprises connecting the substrate to a ground plane.

15. A process according to any of claims 7 to 14 characterized in that said process includes the step of placing said substrate in an area with air at atmospheric pressure.

16. A process according to any of claims 7 to 14 characterized in that said process includes the step of placing said substrate in the presence of a gas other than air.

Patentansprüche

1. Elektrosprühkopf zur Abgabe von feinteiligem Gut, mit einer Kapillarnadel und einer diese umgebenden Fläche, die beide mindestens halbleitend sind und zwischen denen ein Potential angelegt werden kann, um an der Austrittsöffnung der Nadel Flüssigkeit zu zerstäuben, wobei eine leitfähige Platte (21) eine Mehrzahl von Kapillarnadeln (11) trägt, die in mindestens zwei Reihen angeordnet sind und deren Spitzen in derselben Ebene liegen, eine leitfähige Sprühscheibe (14) mit einer Mehrzahl von kreisförmigen Löchern (13) so angeordnet ist, daß die Nadeln (11) koaxial mit je einem der Löcher (13) koaxial sind und daß die Sprühscheibe (14) in einem vorherbestimmten Anstand von der leitfähigen Platte (21) angeordnet ist, so daß eine Abgabe von Fluid in Form eines einheitlichen Nebels von den Nadeln (11) herbeigeführt wird, ferner ein Verteiler (15) vorgesehen ist, der mit den Kapillarnadeln (11) in Verbindung steht, um den Reihen von Kapillarnadeln (11) Flüssigkeit zuzuführen, und eine elektrische Einrichtung (V₁) vorgesehen ist, die dazu dient, zwischen jeder der Kapillarnadeln (11) und der Sprühscheibe (14) ein elektrisches Potential zu entwickeln, das bewirkt, daß auf eine Materialbahn (30) eine dünne Beschichtung aufgetragen wird, sowie eine Einrichtung zum Entwickeln eines zweiten elektrischen Potentials (E₂) zwischen den Nadeln (11) und der zu beschichtenden Fläche.

2. Elektrosprühkopf nach Anspruch 1, dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß die Mehrzahl von Kapillarnadeln (11) aus mehr als zwanzig Nadeln besteht, die in zwei parallelen Reihen angeordnet sind, und daß die Nadeln in den Reihen in der Querrichtung gegeneinander versetzt sind.

3. Elektrosprüh-Beschichtungskopf nach Anspruch 1, dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß auf den ebenen Flächen der Sprühscheibe eine Isolierschicht (64, 66) vorgesehen ist, die einem Ansammeln von Tröpfchen auf der Sprühscheibe (14) entgegenwirkt.

4. Elektrosprüh-Beschichtungskopf nach Anspruch 3, dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß die Isolierschicht (64, 66) ein isolierendes Haftklebeband ist.

5. Elektrosprüh-Beschichtungskopf nach Anspruch 3, dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß die Isolierschicht (64, 66) eine Feinfolie aus isolierendem Kunststoff ist.

6. Elektrosprüh-Beschichtungskopf nach Anspruch 1, dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß die Nadeln mit einer isolierenden Abdeckung bedeckt sind.

7. Verfahren zum Beschichten einer Oberfläche einer Materialbahn (30), deren Oberflächenenergie genügt, um ein Benetzen ihrer Oberfläche mit kleinen Tröpfchen eines Beschichtungsmaterials zwecks Bildung einer dünnen Beschichtung zu gestatten, mit folgenden Schritten: das Beschichtungsmaterial wird durch Pumpen einer Kapillarnadel (11) zugeführt, zwischen der Nadel (11) und einer sie umgebenden Sprühscheibe (14) wird eine elektrostatische Kraft (E₁) erzeugt, um einen Sprühnebel aus Tröpfchen zu erzeugen, wobei quer zu der Materialbahn (30) eine Mehrzahl von Nadeln (11) in mindestens zwei Reihen angeordnet ist und das Verfahren weitere Schritte umfaßt, in denen die Materialbahn (30) quer zu den Reihen von Kapillarnadeln (11) vorwärtsbewegt wird, zwischen den Nadeln (11) und der Oberfläche der Materialbahn ein zweites elektrisches Potential (E₂) erzeugt wird, um aufgeladene Materialtröpfchen an die Oberfläche anzuziehen, und die Ladung von der Oberfläche des Substrats entfernt wird.

8. Verfahren nach Anspruch 7, dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß das Verfahren einen Schritt umfaßt, in dem das Material den Nadeln (11) durch Pumpen in Volumina von zwischen 70 und 11 000 $\mu\text{l/h}$ pro Nadel zugeführt wird, um eine aus dem Material bestehenden Beschichtung in einer Dicke von weniger als 500 nm zu erzeugen.
- 5 9. Verfahren nach Anspruch 7 oder 8, dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß das Verfahren Schritte umfaßt, in denen die Materialbahn (30) zum Erzeugen eines elektrostatischen Feldes aufgeladen wird und die Materialbahn bei ihrem Vorwärtsbewegen an mindestens zwei Reihen von Kapillarnadeln (11) vorbeibewegt wird, die gegeneinander versetzt und im Abstand von der Bahn des Substrats angeordnet sind.
- 10 10. Verfahren nach Anspruch 9, dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß das Beschichtungsmaterial ein Oligomer oder ein Monomer ist.
11. Verfahren nach Anspruch 9, dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß das Verfahren einen Schritt umfaßt, in dem die Beschichtung gehärtet wird.
12. Verfahren nach Anspruch 9, dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß es einen Schritt umfaßt, in dem das Substrat vor seinem Aufladen gereinigt wird.
- 15 13. Verfahren nach Anspruch 9, dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß zum Aufladen eine Ladung auf eine mit der Beschichtung zu versiehende Fläche des Substrats aufgebracht wird.
14. Verfahren nach Anspruch 9, dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß zum Aufladen das Substrat dieses mit einer Masseebene verbunden wird.
15. Verfahren nach Anspruch 9, dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß das Verfahren einen Schritt umfaßt, in dem das Substrat in einen Bereich mit unter atmosphärischem Druck stehender Luft angeordnet wird.
- 20 16. Verfahren nach Anspruch 9, dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß das Verfahren einen Schritt umfaßt, in dem das Substrat einem anderen Gas als Luft ausgesetzt wird.

Revendications

- 25 1. Tête de pulvérisation électrostatique pour la production d'une décharge en petites particules, comprenant une aiguille capillaire et une surface environnante, les deux étant au moins semiconductrices, entre lesquelles un potentiel peut être créé pour produire la pulvérisation d'un liquide à l'orifice des aiguilles, dans laquelle un plateau conducteur (21) supporte une série d'aiguilles capillaires (11) agencées
- 30 en au moins deux rangées, avec les pointes des aiguilles se trouvant dans le même plan, et un plateau extracteur conducteur (14) comportant une série de trous circulaires (13) est disposé de manière qu'une aiguille susdite (11) soit disposée coaxialement à chaque trou (13), et le plateau extracteur (14) est espacé d'une distance prédéterminée du plateau conducteur susdit (21) pour développer une décharge en brouillard uniforme de fluide depuis les aiguilles (11), un dispositif collecteur (15) communiquant avec les
- 35 aiguilles capillaires (11) pour alimenter un liquide aux rangées susdites d'aiguilles capillaires (11), et un dispositif électrique (V_1) destiné à développer un potentiel électrique entre chaque aiguille capillaire susdite (11) et le plateau extracteur (14) en vue de l'application d'une mince couche à une pièce (30), et un dispositif (E_2) destiné à développer un second potentiel électrique entre les aiguilles (11) et la surface à enrober.
2. Tête d'enrobage par pulvérisation électrostatique suivant la revendication 1, caractérisé en ce que la série d'aiguilles capillaires (11) comprend plus de vingt aiguilles disposées en deux rangées parallèles, les aiguilles (11) étant décalées dans la relation spatiale transversale des rangées.
- 40 3. Tête d'enrobage à pulvérisation électrolytique suivant la revendication 1, caractérisée en ce qu'une couche isolante (64, 66) est disposée sur le plateau extracteur, sur les surfaces planes de celui-ci, pour limiter la récolte de gouttelettes sur le plateau extracteur (14).
- 45 4. Tête d'enrobage à pulvérisation électrostatique suivant la revendication 3, caractérisée en ce que la couche isolante (64, 66) est un ruban adhésif sensible à la pression, isolant.
5. Tête d'enrobage à pulvérisation électrostatique suivant la revendication 3, caractérisée en ce que la couche isolante (64, 66) est un mince feuillet de matière plastique isolante.
6. Tête d'enrobage à pulvérisation électrostatique suivant la revendication 1, caractérisée en ce que
- 50 les aiguilles sont recouvertes par un enrobage isolant.
7. Procédé d'enrobage d'une surface d'une pièce (30) présentant une énergie superficielle suffisante pour permettre le mouillage de sa surface par de petites gouttelettes d'une matière d'enrobage en vue de former un enrobage mince, comprenant le pompage de la matière d'enrobage vers une aiguille capillaire (11), la création d'une force électrostatique (E_1) entre l'aiguille (11) et un plateau extracteur environnant
- 55 (14) pour générer une pulvérisation de gouttelettes, dans lequel une série d'aiguilles (11) se présentant suivant au moins deux rangées sont disposées transversalement à la pièce (30), et le procédé comprend en outre l'avance de la pièce (30) transversalement aux rangées d'aiguilles capillaires (11), la création d'un second potentiel électrique (E_2) entre les aiguilles et la surface de la pièce pour attirer des gouttelettes chargées de manière vers cette surface, et la suppression de la charge sur la surface susdite de support.
- 60 8. Procédé suivant la revendication 7, caractérisé en ce qu'il comprend la phase de pompage de la matière susdite vers les aiguilles précitées (11) à des volumes compris entre 70 et 11 000 $\mu\text{l/heure}$ par aiguille pour produire un enrobage de matière d'une épaisseur inférieure à 5000 Angstroms.
9. Procédé suivant la revendication 7 ou la revendication 8, caractérisé en ce que le procédé comprend les phases de charge de la matière susdite (30) pour développer un champ électrostatique, et la
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phase d'avance susdite comprend le passage de la pièce par au moins deux rangées d'aiguilles capillaires (11) qui sont décalées et espacées par rapport au parcours du support.

10. Procédé suivant la revendication 9, caractérisé en ce que la matière d'enrobage est un oligomère ou un monomère.

5 11. Procédé suivant la revendication 9, caractérisé en ce que le procédé comprend la phase de durcissement de l'enrobage.

12. Procédé suivant la revendication 9, caractérisé en ce qu'il comprend la phase de nettoyage du support avant la charge de celui-ci.

10 13. Procédé suivant la revendication 9, caractérisé en ce que la phase de charge comprend la mise en place d'une charge sur une surface d'un support où l'enrobage susdit est désiré.

14. Procédé suivant la revendication 9, caractérisé en ce que la phase de charge comprend la connexion du support à un plan mis à la terre.

15. Procédé suivant la revendication 9, caractérisé en ce qu'il comprend la phase de mise en place du support dans une zone se trouvant à l'air et à la pression atmosphérique.

15 16. Procédé suivant la revendication 9, caractérisé en ce qu'il comprend la phase de mise en place du support en présence d'un gaz autre que l'air.

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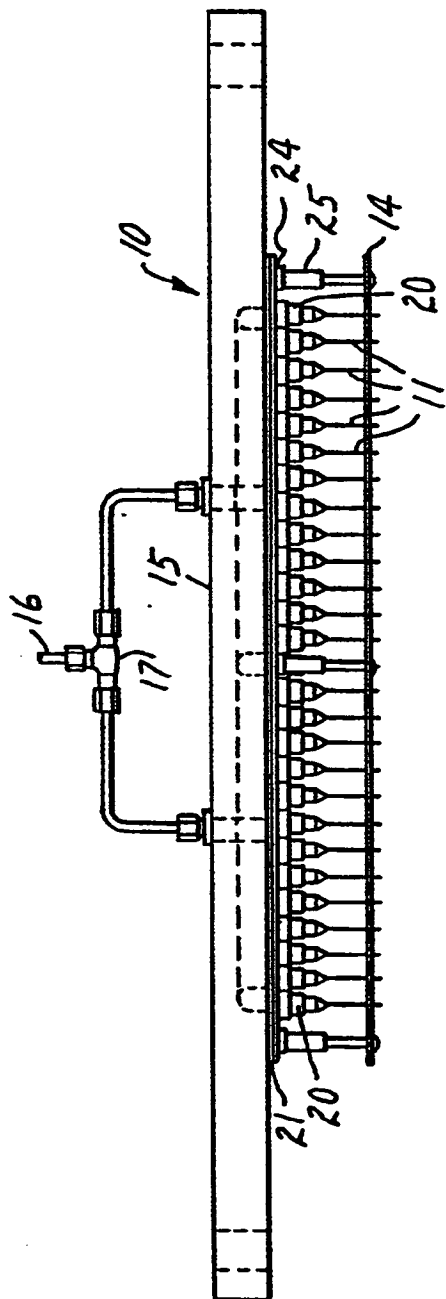


FIG. 1

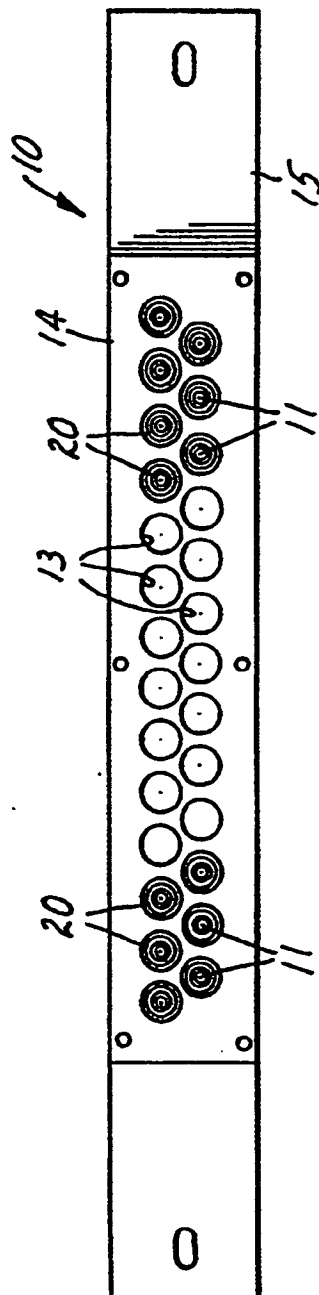


FIG. 2

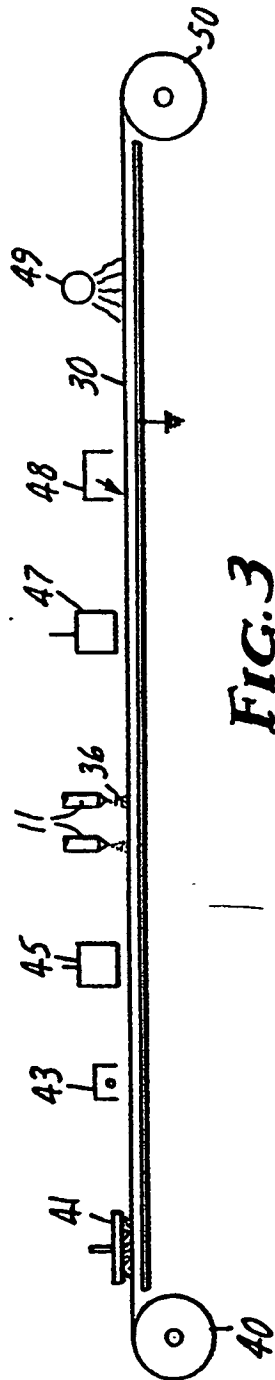


FIG. 3

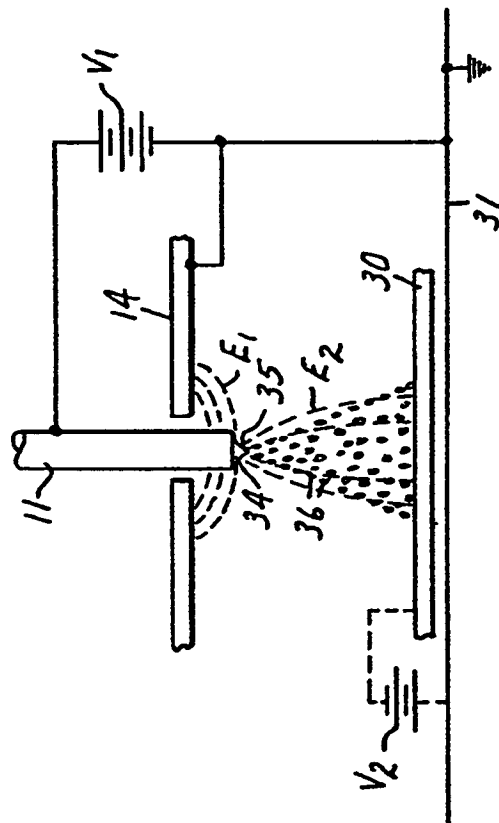


FIG. 4

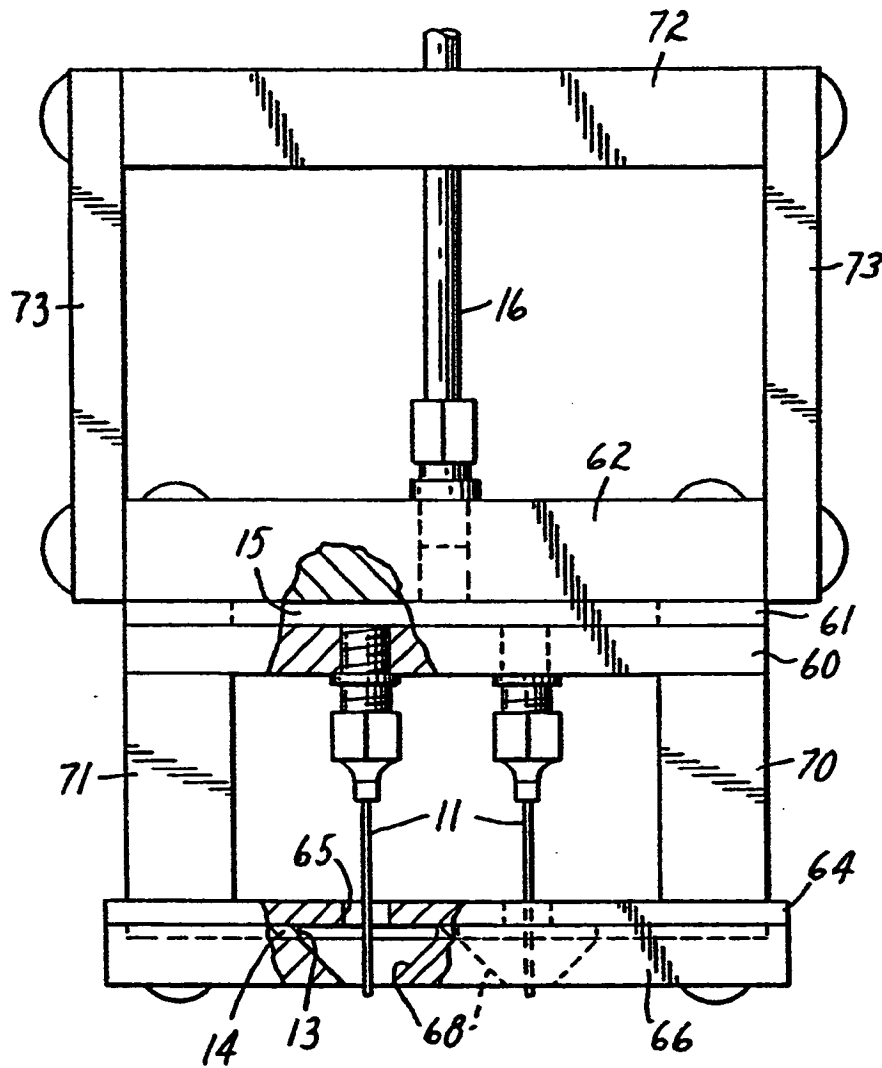


FIG. 5